

LURE OF THE LIGHT

Historic beacon on Gurnet Point retains its charm

By KAREN GOULART
The Patriot Ledger

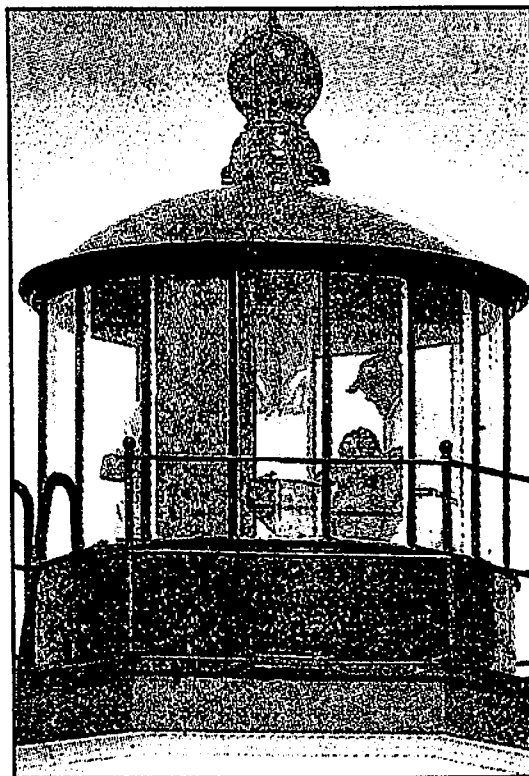
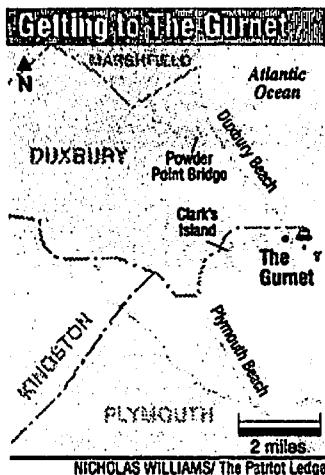
Walk through the dunes, past skittering plovers and hovering dragonflies, and at the end of a lane that winds through a smattering of summer homes you'll find an historic treasure of the South Shore.

Though small in stature at just 39 feet tall, Gurnet Light has had the big job of guiding ships into and out of Plymouth Harbor for more than 150 years.

Alden Ringquist loves to tell its story. His face lights up and his hands are given to emphatic gesticulation as talks about the lighthouse's past.

The squat, wood-framed beacon, built in 1842, is the most recent incarnation of

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On a clear day, Provincetown is visible from the lantern room atop 162-year-old Gurnet Light. The original lighthouse was built in 1769.

How to help

Donations to help maintain the lighthouse can be sent to: Project Gurnet and Bug Light Inc., P.O. Box 2167, Duxbury 02331-2167. For more information about the project, call Alden Ringquist at 781-934-2879.



GARY HIGGINS/The Patriot Ledger

Visitors climb stairs to reach the base of Gurnet Light. Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc. hopes to become the light's permanent caretaker.

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the original lighthouse, built in 1769.

It was home to the first woman who served as a lighthouse keeper. Hannah Thomas took over when her husband went off to fight — and die — in the Revolutionary War.

The name Gurnet may or may not come from the peninsula's resemblance to a stout-headed fish native to the English Channel.

Ringquist is a member of Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc., a Duxbury-based group that hopes to become the perpetual caretaker of Gurnet Light and nearby Duxbury Pier Light, known by many as Bug Light.

Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc. has been maintaining Bug Light since 1983 and picked up the Gurnet caretaking duties in 1998.

Both lighthouses are on the Coast Guard's list of "excess" lights. They are no longer needed and are more or less up for grabs. Ringquist said the group hopes to get both as well as the Gurnet lightkeeper's quarters.

Getting Gurnet Light, also known as Plymouth Light, wouldn't cost a dime; the group just has to prove that it is up for the job.

Ringquist thumps down a thick, heavy binder, Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc.'s 90-page bid. In it the group details its ability to

preserve and maintain the lighthouse properties.

It has to pass muster not only with the Coast Guard but the federal Department of Homeland Security, the General Services Administration and the National Park Service.

Thanks to fund-raisers and donations, the group has an endowment of about \$160,000, Ringquist said. He hopes that its history with the lighthouses will show that Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc. is worthy of becoming permanent caretaker and sharing the lights with future generations.

"If we take control, we plan to have people bid for the chance to be lighthouse keeper for a week," Ringquist said.

Countless boaters and landlubbers have seen the light from a distance, but relatively few get an up-close look. Fewer still get the chance to climb the tower and survey the sea.

The light is like a secret clubhouse at the southern end of Duxbury Beach. It is reached via 4 miles of sandy road flanked by poison ivy and beach plum. Most of the route is in Duxbury, but the lighthouse is in Plymouth.

Inside the lighthouse, two steep wooden staircases lead to a ladder that is steeper still. A tiny hatch opens into the lantern room.

From here, the floating lobster

trap buoys are tiny, bobbing pinpricks. You can see all the way to Provincetown on a clear day.

Currently, the lighthouse is only open to the public once a year, during Duxbury's Opening of the Bay festivities on Memorial Day weekend. Small groups are sometimes given tours.

On a recent sunny morning, the Audubon Society group took about a dozen people out to Gurnet Point for a peek.

Katy Gaenicke, a Duxbury resident for four years, saw a flier for the tour and had to sign up.

"It's fascinating out here," she said.

She is pleased that Project Gurnet and Bug Lights Inc. wants to continue to take care of the lighthouses, and she hopes that schools show an interest in bringing students out to learn the local history. She plans to come back and bring her children.

Sabina Crosby-Barrett of New York City has spent summers in Duxbury since she was a little girl. She wanted to share the lighthouse with her daughter, Melinda Barrett.

"When I was a kid, I walked all the way out (to the lighthouse) to see it. It's nice to be able to go inside," Crosby-Barrett said. "Lighthouses hold such a fantasy. It's kind of a romantic thing."

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A brief history

■ 1769: Built on land owned by John Thomas, its first keeper

■ 1790: Turned over to the U.S. government

■ 1801: Burned to the ground

■ 1803: Two towers built to take the original light's place

■ 1842: Ill-repaired towers replaced with two new towers

■ 1871: New lenses added to increase the lights' range

■ 1914: Cape Cod Canal opens, increasing importance of the lights as navigational aids

■ 1924: One tower removed as Bureau of Lighthouses phases out multiple-light stations

■ 1998: Coast Guard moves the remaining lighthouse away from the edge of an eroding cliff

'IT'S FASCINATING OUT HERE'

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GARY HIGGINS photos/The Patriot Ledger

■ Visitors make their way to historic Gumet Light for a tour led by Alden Ringquist of a Duxbury-based group called Project Gumet and Bug Lights Inc. The group has been maintaining the lighthouse since 1998.